OLD CONCORD

SAMUEL MERWIN

The Riverside Press Cambridge

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OLD CONCORD

Seen Through Western Spectacles

BY

SAMUEL MERWIN

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THE OLD MANSE

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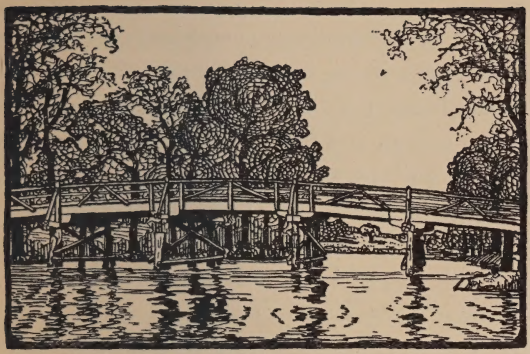


OLD CONCORD

Seen Through Western Spectacles

FOR a bird's-eye view of the village — or the Center, as it is locally known to distinguish it from the Junction, Nine-acre Corner, and lesser groups of homes within the wide-spread town — point your motor up Nashawtuc Hill, circle the old reservoir, and come to rest by the stone wall at the brink of the southeastern slope. You will there find yourself surveying a broad forest of elms with a little silver river winding through. Here and there a roof peeps out of the foliage, and the gilt cupola of the Unitarian Meeting-House stands

high. You will see as well a stone bridge or two, a boat-house with rowboats and small launches fast to a float, and two railway-trestles.

This will be Old Concord. Here Emerson, the sage, preached and wrote. Here Hawthorne walked in solitude and wrote. Here Thoreau built his hut by Walden Pond and wrote. Here Bronson Alcott founded his School of Philosophy and wrote his fifty-volume diary. Here his more famous daughter, Louisa, romped as a child and staged village plays (fearsome melodramas by choice) and wrote the novels of boyhood and girlhood that voiced an epoch. Here the Transcendentalists of Brook Farm days met and talked and wrote. Here Margaret Fuller visited and wrote. Here Frank B. Sanborn defied the federal enforcers of the Fugitive Slave Law and lived to write trenchantly until a few years ago. I can see him now, in the post-office or Richardson's Drug-Store, gaunt, tall, gray hair fringing his collar, or moving about the Milldam (a later word about that) with long strides and a far look in the old eyes. Here Jane G. Austin (with an 'i')

lived on Main Street and wrote the once popular 'Nameless Nobleman.' Here, too, at the Old North Bridge... the modern concrete replica of which you cannot quite see for the trees... was fired, on April 19, 1775, the shot heard round the world. There may be truth in the old saying that the Battle of Lexington was fought at Concord by Acton men, but at any rate here is the scene of that historic struggle in which our Nation had its beginning. By the bridge stands the sculptured Minute-Man of Daniel Chester French, who lived in Concord as a boy and had his first lessons in drawing from Louisa Alcott's gifted sister May. Indeed I know of no finer sense of fitness, no more moving patriotic thrill, than to stand before that lithe young figure in bronze, turning, musket in hand, from his plough; then to read Emerson's stirring quatrain inscribed on the pedestal; and linger to think that minute-man, sculptor, and poet were all of the fiber of the old town, and that this was the actual spot. As it is stirring to look nearer at hand, down the slope of Nashawtuc Hill (it was Lee's Hill then) and re-

call that more than a hundred years ago the oak timbers for the frigate *Constitution* were cut and hewn directly here, about the place where your car rests.

Old inhabitants lament the changes in the village. In their eyes, much that was Old Concord is irrevocably gone. And changes have come. New houses have had to be built. There is a pleasant section on the high ground at the western end of the village that savors a little perhaps of modern real-estate 'development.' Old people have died and new ones moved in. We have flappers and jazz. But to a new-comer — and one who like myself has but lately rounded out his first ten years of residence is a new-comer indeed! — it is a daily surprise that so much, so very much, of the old solid character of the place can live on in the heedless and confused present. And above all that it can so teem with vitality and human energy. Quaint it may be; it is; but effete, no.

There is a simple monument by the old stone bridge in Wayland, six miles to the south, commemorating the deeds of the Concord men who

fought in King Philip's War. Look about you in the village, on store-fronts, or among the pages of the annual town report, and you will find that many of those identical names are in active life to-day. The families are here. Many of the sons and daughters have scattered in the work and life of the world, but back they come, sooner or later, to the old town. There is vigor, as there is thrift. If you wish to see both qualities functioning at their ripest, attend one of the annual town-meetings. There they patiently sit, hundreds of men and women citizens, with the town report and the warrant itemizing every proposed expenditure in terms of the tax-rate, listening, watching, speaking their minds with a readiness and a firmness of opinion that would make short work of any budding politician who might fancy himself a manipulator of the popular will. It is the sturdy individualism of an earlier and, I think, sounder America. Slogans have no weight. Boosters are noise and nuisance. A firm old Anglo-Saxon sense of fact rules the occasion. It is a survival, but an extremely lively one.

And there is overshadowing tone. Because the past has been so rich in flavor, the sense of personal responsibility for the present and the future runs deep. It is enough for any new proposal to be 'good for the town.' Let that thought (always with the precise reasons for it!) settle in enough of these independent minds, and the thing is as good as done. But everything is considered in purely Concord terms. I have been unable to detect the slightest impulse to be bigger or better known. The very modern country club, even, makes no effort to rival similar neighboring organizations. The building is modest but charming (they know all about intelligent and beautiful building in this home of the 'colonial'). The dues were only recently raised from twenty to thirty dollars a year; and out of that income the original indebtedness is being paid off. But the golf-course and tennis-courts are really good, the golf professional is a recognized master teacher, and the meals are well cooked. Everything good without foolish expense. Everything for use. The rest simplicity.

THE EMERSON HOUSE

Indeed Mr. Veblen's doctrine of conspicuous waste, as a ruling principle in modern American life, has never stirred a ripple in Concord, and I don't believe it ever can. There is a measure of modest wealth in and about the village, but I have known of but two or three families who kept a butler. The same few 'accommodators' appear here, there, anywhere at dinner-parties, and it is nothing uncommon to hear a friendly 'Good-evening, Mary,' directed from the proper guest at table to the smiling woman who is serving the soup. Individuals are appraised as quietly and shrewdly as are costs and causes. It is extremely amusing to sit by and watch when an occasional new-comer of some self-importance undertakes to make an impression on the village. Comment — beyond what inevitably and continuously flies about over the tea-tables — is hardly necessary. Your true Yankee is chary of words. And a homogeneous people grown out of one firm background gets along excellently without them. A look is enough. And there are understanding silences. For these folk are all zoned

in the same wave-length, and no effort at tuning in is necessary. They simply watch and wait, going their own way. Sooner or later the flamboyant intruder fades, either down into the picture or out of town. For the thing can't be altered. It is too deeply ingrained for that.

But I have found nothing indifferent or ungenerous about these surviving Yankees. If never effusive, if never in the least measure emotional, if always a little brusque about merely human matters, they are thoughtful and keen and just. The stranger will receive all the welcome he merits. Sham of every sort leaves them cold. But honest quality is invariably paid in kind. And coöperation is looked for as a matter of course. They are a painstaking thorough folk. Accept a task on any sort of local committee, and you will find that the standard of industry and personal responsibility leaves no room whatever for the slacker. Everybody does his bit, whatever his natural sort of bit may be, 'for the town'; either actively in the healthy old political organization, or in some one of the extra-

political social activities, from the antiquarian or art associations to the Woman's Musical Club. The old place fairly boils with communal energy. Recently when a list was compiled of all the organizations that give one or another sort of entertainment for the public during the year — the listing being a step toward avoiding clashes in dates — the number that sent representatives to discuss the matter came to nearly sixty. The population of the town is little more than six thousand, and of the Center hardly half that!

From the days of Miss Alcott and earlier, Concord has fairly erupted amateur plays. They are given now not only by the somewhat highly organized Concord Players, who move in circles that radiate to some distance from the modest Veterans Hall on Walden Street, but also by the Women's Club, the Grange, the Legion, the Knights of Columbus, the various schools; the list is in truth so long that to enumerate them all would consume a paragraph. As my own intensively active connection with the Concord Players takes up at least a hundred evenings a

season, from September to May, there is more truth than fiction in a certain pet jest that I have to run down to New York from the busy village now and then for a rest.

And they are mindful of their own. In a village that is itself an institution with a curiously personalized history, every person who serves long in the community (and I have perhaps made it clear that it is difficult to live here without serving) tends to become something of an institution too. In a community so tightly bound together there are a few sorts of individuals who stand as general help to the householders and the town . . . such as the peripatetic 'accommodators' I have already mentioned, certain men who have for a long time done grading and tree work, and others who serve in similar capacities. When a disaster falls on any one of these, aid is organized automatically and at once. If it be a surgical operation or a stolen Ford, a subscription is quietly taken up. The word goes around in that curious wireless way, all within that perhaps narrow but sufficiently inclusive wave-length.

The thing is always done and done well, without too many words. Just done.

But it may be that our bird's-eye view has become too much of an X-ray view. Suppose we drive down the hill, winding along a perfect modern road among comparatively recent houses (the children still coast here every winter), cross the stone bridge and turn left on Main Street toward the heart of the village. Here on either hand stand houses of the early nineteenth and late eighteenth centuries. Fine old white houses, built in a day when the instinct for proportion that is in itself sheer beauty still animated builders. Here lines, angles, and planes have a meaning and a distinction. There are well-designed doorways and, behind them, fine paneling and spacious fireplaces. They lived well in those older days. On the left spacious lawns slope down through pleasant groves to the little river. I know of an old-worldly bowling-green on one of these lawns, and a curling-rink on another. To be sure, an endless stream of passenger-cars and trucks moves by... they are of to-day;

huge trucks that rattle windows and sometimes shake down a bit of old plaster as they rumble past . . . for Main Street is a part of the direct route through Ayer and Fitchburg to North Adams and the Mohawk Trail; but nevertheless the past holds its own behind the old-fashioned fences. Passing a graveyard of the long ago, with rows of gray slabs and many quaint inscriptions, we reach the block-length of shops that is traditionally known as the Milldam. Once it was an actual earthen dam lined with buildings, many of which, quaint and charming as to roof-lines and slopes, still stand there; but the Mill Brook has disappeared beneath the macadam, and the old mill is a memory.

And here, along the busy Milldam, lives and breathes to-day more of what once was Concord than the swarming tourists will ever see; more indeed than the old inhabitants can believe is left. Stand for an hour or so in the dingy but thriving corner drug-store, and you will see much of the village life. The place is a clearing-house for local news. Here everybody knows everybody;

parcels and messages are left for others to pick up; friends meet and chat. For the gossip of the outlying country-side you have only to step upstairs to the barber-shop on the second floor, where pure Yankees who in everything but costume might have stepped directly out of the eighteenth century exchange monosyllabic information regarding the price of eggs, problems of the volunteer fire department, and gossip about real property and new building.

And for news of the multifarious feminine activities it is only necessary to walk past a few doors and drop into a fascinating shop where books and stationery and chinaware and notions and pots of flowers are dispensed. The proper old Massachusetts name for this sort of merchandise is, I understand, 'smallwares.' There is a bow-window behind the screen at the rear, with sewing-baskets, a tea-table, and a half-read book or two. And from this window the kindly mistress of the shop, herself one of those personal institutions in which the town abounds, may look down on the narrow dark brook, where it pre-

THE OLD MILL BUILDING ON THE MILLDAM

pares to disappear under the building, and see an occasional trout leap at a gnat. I know of no other shop in America, and I have traveled widely since my upbringing in Illinois, that has so much atmosphere and charm.

The very individuals that meet along the Milldam bespeak at once the rugged individuality and the pervasive tone of the town. The simply dressed woman who noses her car in to the curb and steps out to shop may be as familiar with Paris and Pasadena as any New-Yorker, but here she speaks and moves in the comfortable quiet Concord way. The gaunt man in boots, overalls, and sheepskin coat who dismounts from his farm truck may be a club-man in Boston and a leader among the alumni of Harvard. But here he goes about his business in the unassuming Concord way. The dairy-farmer who, when hands are short, unhesitatingly delivers your milk in person, may possess a fine home filled with priceless old furniture; or he may be a collector of modern paintings or of the 'ana' (to use a three-letter noun given recent standing by the

cross-worders) of Thoreau or Hawthorne or Emerson. Old Concord, to me, survives hardily in this fine simplicity. There is a magnificent honesty about it, as there is spirit and taste.

We have heard and read much of the New England conscience, and of course the odd stubborn thing exists. Yet in many books I have read and plays I have seen, this conscience was so confused with a narrow piety that I used to imagine the true Yankee as a rather unhappily sanctimonious person. But he is not. At least in this region. In matters of religion and general mental interest, he is inquiring and broad; possibly because Unitarians rather than Presbyterians built the early traditions. A fact, this, which some of our none too widely informed younger writers might note to their advantage. I find the Yankee a bit more complex and harder to classify than my reading about him has implied.

At the upper end of the Milldam stands Wright's Tavern, a square structure dating from early eighteenth-century times. Here it was, according to the quite inaccurate legend, that

Major Pitcairn lunched on the day of the fight and, stirring his brandy with a brutal forefinger, announced that so he proposed to stir the rebel blood that day. Historical inquiry has uncovered the truth that Pitcairn was a decent gentleman who little relished his task. But the legend survives.

Opposite the tavern a row of seventeenth-century houses lingers on, one of which has been converted into an Art Center, where exhibitions of painting are held every spring. And there is a little stone house with latticed casements and a stone fountain in front decorated with circles of seashells, from which the original Rollo might quite naturally have stepped forth to question the omniscient Beechnut.

Diagonally across from the tavern lies the village green, with its simple battle monuments; the town hall, of red brick, where Louisa Alcott put on her more ambitious dramatic offerings in the earlier eighteen-fifties (the lesser efforts were household affairs); and, beyond the green, the rambling Colonial Inn. This structure is made up of three old houses, in the central one of which was born

Edward Simmons, the painter, whose recently published autobiography rather ruffled the town. From the inn you drive out Monument Street to the North Bridge and the Minute-Man; passing on the way the Jones farm-house with its revolutionary bullet-hole preserved under a diamond-shaped bit of glass, and the Old Manse, commemorated by Hawthorne, and now grown much older and mossier.

In the opposite direction from Wright's Tavern, to the right along Lexington Road, are the Alcott and Emerson homes, Hawthorne's other dwelling-place, the Wayside (with its square cupola of a study which that master of prose entered by means of a ladder and a trap-door), and the cottage of Ephraim Bull who originated the Concord grape. The stump of the original vine is still to be seen in the yard.

Perhaps the happiest survival of what was physically Old Concord is the Alcott home, Orchard House. It is a show-place now, administered by an association, and stopped at by all the sight-seeing buses from Boston. But the walls and

floors, the furniture, books and pictures, the keepsakes and little treasures of that intimate family life of the eighteen-forties and fifties, of, indeed, the famous Little Women, have been gathered in and preserved. Even 'Amy's' drawings are there on the walls and door of her tiny room. And outside, house, yard, and even atmosphere are intact. It is a little brown wren of a house, nestling behind a low fence under immense old elms. Even the small barn-like structure, with its touch of aspiring Gothic in the shape of doors and windows, that bore the name of the School of Philosophy, is still there, in the rear, among the trees and shrubbery.

About nine o'clock, one June morning, six or seven years ago, while driving down to the Center for the mail, I pulled up with a start just in front of Orchard House. For there, sitting on the door-step and chatting in the yard, were the Alcotts and their friends. I sat in my car by the fence and literally rubbed my eyes. There were the Little Women, all of them; Mr. and Mrs. Bronson Alcott, Laurie and Mr. March, even

GRAPEVINE COTTAGE
Home of the Concord Grape

Professor Bhaer. And there were the old costumes . . . dimity and lace, hoop-skirts, bonnets with strings; and the men in blue swallowtails and stocks and beaver hats. There was no gaping crowd. No pageant had been announced or even gossiped about. And it was nine o'clock of a workaday morning! Yet there they all were, quietly natural as they could ever have been in life. And I recall thinking, there in my car, that I might have expected it. The past is only just around the corner in Concord. It might catch up any day.

But just then, as the familiar voice of Henry Hull, the actor, shouted my name — indeed as he jeopardized a neatly fitting costume by vaulting the fence — my bewildered eyes caught sight of a camera man in puttees arranging reflectors for back-lighting, and the spell was broken. The Little Women were in the pictures! But for a moment the past had been reality.

As for what was most inspiring in the soul of Old Concord, it may be found to-day only a quarter of a mile along the road from the Alcott

place, where the square white house of Ralph Waldo Emerson settles modestly back under its lofty pines. The house is not shown to tourists; but to the privileged few who have crossed its threshold it is a shrine indeed, and strangely like a shrine to a living spirit. The interior is quaintly early Victorian. There is the old haircloth furniture, the decorous mahogany, the portraits. The old bell-pulls hang on the walls. From what we should now call the living-room one steps through a niche beside the fireplace into the library. This room is as Emerson left it. His writing-materials lie in their accustomed place on the table. Everything is in order and appears ready for use. The Sage, it would almost seem, is expected in at any moment. The walls are lined from floor to ceiling with books. And such books! There is not a dealer or collector in America (and perhaps England and the Continent) who doesn't know almost by heart the contents of those weighted shelves. The classics of Greece and Rome of course; solid histories of the day; philosophy and metaphysics; and — I almost

wrote 'but' — first editions of the great Victorian masters, in perfect condition, each with an inscription from its author to a revered confrère. In that library the voice drops and the past does seem for the moment to catch up.

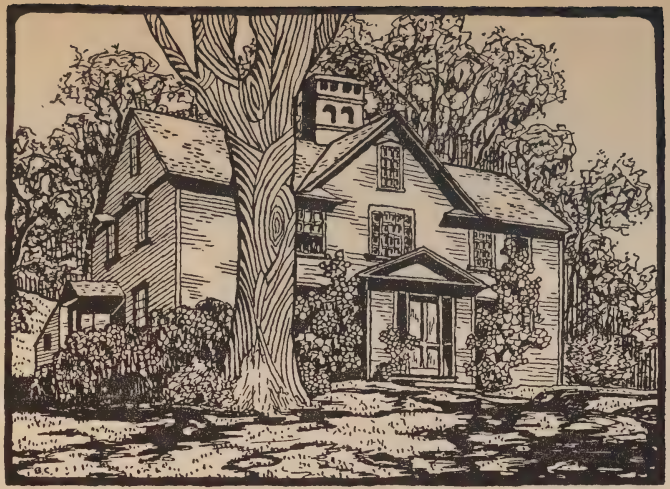
So much for relics and memories. Deeply more interesting to the observant new-comer are the many human survivals. The town is richest of all in these, for the old breed was sturdy. My own first few years of residence were a continuous and delightful exploration of living folk. I remember taking a broken window-screen to a carpenter for mending only to find him making a banjo-clock! A gentle bearded figure, ready for any casual task, who turned in leisure moments to such delicate cabinet work as Sheraton and Chippendale loved. A quite extraordinary little scene followed when, in response to my frank interest, he dragged out a blackened iron-bound box, and standing over it explained, with a shy dignity: 'When I was a young man a journeyman carpenter was judged by his chest. And . . . well, this was mine.' He unlocked the box and raised the lid. Within it

was a marvel of trays in beveled mahogany, each running on noiseless brass rollers. And the entire inner side of that lid was an intricate design in inlay of rare woods — red and white mahogany, ebony, rosewood, satinwood (as I remember), and, by way of loyal local interest, a bit of the Old Meeting-House and another bit of the old North Bridge! That chest will be a treasure for collectors of the 'antique' in some later thinner day.

You may stop at a gasoline filling-station to find the grizzled man at the crank a mine of Concord lore. The typical country doctor of the old days still thrives here; the elderly man who will travel miles on snowshoes over a winter-bound countryside to save a leg or a life; who can unhesitatingly operate in the woods with a jackknife if needs must. Of one such, the late Dr. George Titcomb, there are legends that would fill volumes. And men live long here, men and women as well. Until within a year or so, aged somewhere in the middle nineties, old Cy Clark drove his wagon in summer and his pung in winter regularly from his farm to the Milldam and

passed the time of day with his friends. He was but one of a type.

Perhaps because of that fine sturdiness and a natural pride in the unquenchable spirit that still rings like tempered steel in the old stock, little seems to die in Concord. Nearly everything that lives there at all lives to grow. During the Revolution a local Committee of Safety was formed. Instead of disbanding when the crisis had passed, the members agreed to continue their organization under the name of the Social Circle. That was in 1782. In 1882, quite as a matter of course, the members of the day, together with those others that were 'bound to them by ties of marriage or blood,' celebrated the first centenary of the Circle. At the present time, every Tuesday evening, the members of to-day meet to dine and talk. And I know, as I sit in my study on Monument Street writing these pages, that the two hundredth anniversary will be celebrated as a matter of course in 1982. And there will be a third celebration of the kind in 2082. Naturally. Many figures of state-wide fame have belonged to the Social Circle,



ORCHARD HOUSE
Home of the Alcotts

and not a few national figures. Volumes of history and memorabilia regarding it have been published.

This same fiber, this thoroughness and durability, surely account, in so widely different a field, for the mounting success of that modest group of histrions known as the Concord Players. I dwell on them here, not because of any illusion as to the serious importance of such a movement, but because the ground is intimate to me, and, too, because they are so humanly and so surely carrying on one of the rooted communal traditions. Sometime back they emerged from the rather comic personal vanities and petty difficulties known to groups of amateur actors and actresses and began devoting themselves in no light spirit to the serious study of play production and performance. To-day, while the native talent cannot be regarded as greater or less than what is to be found in any reasonably alert and intelligent little community, the spirit is, I believe, not so remote from that which animates the more expert players of the Moscow Art Theater. There are moments when, watching the enthusiasm with which they devote

their evenings to rehearsing, really to endless rehearsing, I find myself thinking of Oberammergau. I have never seen anything quite like it. And I have never seen quite such an ensemble achieved by performers of such limited experience. Even in matters so often regarded as trivial, the spirit is there, and the instinct to build up a standard. Not all these are native Concord folk, by any means, but most are true Yankees, and all of us have been in some measure moulded by the spirit and habit of the town.

It was like Concord too, a few years back, to come to the conclusion that this minor activity was 'good for the town.' The conclusion resulted in the erection of a real stage at one end of the little town armory on Walden Street, a stage so roomy and so perfectly equipped with rigging and lighting facilities that amateurs from other less enterprising if more 'modern' communities can only stare wistfully about them when they visit us. I shall not soon forget certain productions on that stage of late that have seemed to me to approach beauty. Nor shall I

soon forget the human associations formed there.

No, the old place hasn't changed much. In a few externals, yes; but not in character or flavor. Not to these Western eyes. There it is, nestling in its modest valley, a wholesome, tough-fibered, vitally living survival of an America that died some generations back. I have found myself now and then of a quiet evening indulging the fanciful thought that it might be a good thing if our strident anti-Victorians and excited young Freudians, our boosters, sloganeers, supersalesmen and go-getters, our movie manufacturers and their complacent 'stars' (those quotation-marks are hard to resist), our incorrigible New-Yorkers and ardent disciples of Lenin, our expensive golf-maniacs and college-alumni Babbitts, our politicians and Florida realtors, if such could all be made to live here, in town, long enough to experience even a little toning down. Good, that is, for the health of the sometimes blatant new America.

But perhaps these tiresome folk wouldn't learn much. They aren't, taken for all in all, a sensitive tribe. And it would be rough on Concord.

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SAMUEL MERWIN